DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 066 CE 047 282

AUTHOR Thompson, Paul B.
TITLE The Goals of American Agriculture from Thomas Jefferson to the 21st Century. Faculty Paper Series 86-3.
INSTITUTION Texas A and M Univ., College Station. Dept. of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 25p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agricultural Trends; *Agriculture; *Attitude Change; *Ethics; Farmers; *Futures (of Society); Land Use; Natural Resources; *Philosophy; Soil Conservation; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Jefferson (Thomas)

ABSTRACT

Although the practice of agriculture is a universal component of all human societies, the purposes and goals that a society hopes to achieve through agriculture have varied. If the crisis facing agriculture today is to be resolved, a clear sense of agriculture's purpose and goals within American society must be achieved. It must be recognized that the goals for agriculture that have been taken for granted may not always be mutually compatible or mutually shared by all Americans. Although agriculture today is discussed in terms of production and efficiency, in Thomas Jefferson's day agriculture was regarded differently. The farmer's duty--the goal of agriculture in Jefferson's view--was to embody the twin virtues of self-reliance and community. Today, however, agriculture does not promote such goals. How can agriculture be changed to incorporate a sense of responsibility for long-term survival into the choices that people make as consumers, producers, and citizens? The first step is to abandon the modern conceit that agriculture has no moral purpose beyond the economic goals of productivity and efficiency. It must be understood that society cannot serve material goals unless it also serves the goals of community and moral responsibility that make society possible. An understanding of agriculture can be a crucial component in the moral and spiritual regeneration of individuals and society. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED282066

The Goals of American Agriculture from Thomas Jefferson to the 21st Century

Paul B. Thompson
Department of Philosophy
Department of Agricultural Economics
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Darden
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Agriculture is a human activity that takes its shape from its interactions with nature and the rest of the society in which it is practiced. All but the most primitive of societies have had an agriculture, and even the hunter-gatherers practiced rudimentary forms of environmental management, whether they were consciously aware of doing so, or not. Although the practice of agriculture is a virtually universal component of all human societies, the purposes and goals that a society hoped to achieve through agriculture have been variable. If we are to resolve the crisis facing agriculture today (not to mention the, perhaps, more difficult problems we shall face in the future) we must have a clear sense of agriculture's purpose and goals within American society, and we must realize that the goals for agriculture that we have taken for granted may not always be mutually compatible, or mutually shared by all Americans.

Before saying anything about the goals of American agriculture, it is important to recognize that the social goals or purposes of agriculture may be quite different from the

CE047282

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

individual goals of people who are involved in agriculture. An individual may be involved in agriculture, either as a farmer or in a service role, because he wants to provide a good living for his family, or because she enjoys working with animals, or being able to spend time outdoors. There is an important social good which consists in individuals being able to fulfill such goals, but these private goals are not what I have in mind when I talk about the goals of agriculture. Apart from the goals that are set by individual farmers and agricultural service workers, agriculture contributes in various ways to the public good, to the well-being of everyone in society, employed in agriculture or not. Furthermore, American society is structured so as to depend upon agriculture for this contribution in order for the larger whole of society to function as intended. It is in this sense that agriculture has a social purpose, that agriculture has goals which must be sought has a matter of moral duty, and it is these goals that will be the main focus of my remarks.

The Goals of Agriculture Today

It has almost become a cliche to talk about a crisis in American agriculture. Changes in agricultural practices and in the structure of American agriculture have been discussed in every major newspaper and on every major television news broadcast. The litany of issues that have been discussed includes the impending bankruptcy of perhaps 20% of all U. S. family farmers, the related difficulties of the farm credit system that threaten the U. S. economy as a whole, the effects of farm failures on the thousands of rural communities that support U. S. agriculture.

the concentration of economic power into fewer hands in the agricultural sector, the increasing risks of soil erosion and resource depletion as farmers neglect conservation practices in order to assure short term cash income, and the failure of government and the land grant universities to develop policy and research programs that do not interfere with farm decision making, favoring the creation of larger production units, and hence hastening the downfall of the medium scale farm. This list of issues is not complete. There has also been concern over the safety of chemically intensive cultural practices, and with regard to U. S. agriculture's contribution to allieviating world hunger. It would require the full time alloted to me simply to list in sufficient detail all the issues and problems that have been associated with the phrase "crisis in American agriculture." The crisis in American agriculture refers in some general way to all these things. It is tempting to look for a single cause or force that could be responsible for all these difficulties, or to seek a majic bullet that could relieve them all at once. To do so, however, presupposes that we have a clear picture of what a healthy agriculture would look like, and this, in turn, presupposes a clear understanding of agriculture's goals.

All the talk about the farm crisis, however, has been rather short on any discussion about the goals of agriculture. It is as if everyone knows what a healthy agriculture would look like, thus it goes without saying that Americans share a common set of goals or expectations for agriculture. Yet there would almost certainly be a great deal of controversy about which of the

issues listed above is most crucial or, indeed, even genuinely problematic. Is the farm credit problem more important to the overall health of American agriculture than the fact that some 20,000 farm families must find a new way to make a living? Is soil erosion a problem at all? There will be disagreement among us when we try to answer these more specific questions, and it is the lack of agreement on specific issues that indicates the need for us to spend some time thinking about the goals of agriculture. Although we may still disagree about means, we cannot hope to address the crisis in agriculture if we cannot agree on the social purposes we expect our agriculture to fulfill.

The debate and discussion of the current farm crisis has not been entirely devoid of statements on the goals of American agricuture, however. Two goals surface occasionaly in discussions of agriculture. They are <u>productivity</u> and <u>efficiency</u>. These two goals figure implicitly in many statements about the current farm crisis, even when they are not mentioned explicitly. Furthermore, it should not be too surprising that these goals recieve no more discussion than they do, for it really does go without saying that the contribution that any industry makes to the functioning of the economy as a whole can be defined in terms of the goods or services it produces, and the efficiency with which they are produced. Productivity and efficiency are economic concepts that state economic goals, but these economic goals have moral significance. Productivity and efficiency can be stated as legitimate social goals for agriculture only if we can understand these economic concepts in light of the social and

moral values that our society is dedicated to further and advance.

The simplest statement of America's social and moral purpose is, perhaps, in the preamble to the United States Constitution.

> We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The key pharse here is "promote the general welfare." Activities that help Americans acquire the things they want are, other things being equal, good. Commercial activities, the production of goods and services, exist in a capitalistic society to the extent that people want them badly enough to pay for them. The production of goods and services is, therefore, a social value, and part of the social and moral goal of any commercial segment of our economy is simply to provide those goods and services our society demands. Productivity is expressed as a goal for agriculture whenever someone says that "The farmer is the one that feeds us all," or that American agriculture must "feed the world." Productivity is the goal that is implied in the bumper sticker "If you eat, you're involved in agriculture." In our society, the vast majority of us depend upon commercial agriculture for the food that we eat. This food goes beyond something that we want. As a necessity for life, the production of food and fiber is an absolute requirement for the general welfare.

Obvious as it may seem, it is important to recognize that the production of food and fiber for general consumption is a key social and moral goal for agriculture in modern day American society. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the production of food and fiber is not a universal social and moral goal for agriculture, and, indeed, was probably not a goal for American agriculture at the time that the Preamble to the Constitution was written; but this point will be discussed more carefully later.

The question of efficiency is a more difficult one. Economic definitions of efficiency will vary from one to another. The basic idea, however, is that the productive resources of a society can arranged in a number of different ways, and that some arrangements will be capable of producing more of what people want than others. The 17th century English philosopher John Locke gave an early formulation of the social value of efficiency as it applies to agriculture in his discussion of property rights from The 2nd Treatise of Government. He wrote:

> ...he that incloses land, and has a greater plenty of the conviencies of life from ten acres, than he could have from an hundred left to nature, may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind: for his labour now supplies him with provisions out of ten acres, which were but the product of an hundred lying in common.[1]

Locke's idea is simply that agriculture makes a more efficient use of land than does foraging from the land left in its natural

---

[1]John Locke, Second Treatise of Government ed. by C.B. Macpherson, (Indianapolis: 1980, Hackett Publishing Co.), pp 23-24.

state. This efficiency is a social goal because, as Locke puts it, the efficiency achieved "may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind."

Efficiency is a problematic social goal because it is difficult to define in terms that reflect the diversity of resources in agricultural production. In the passage quoted from John Locke, it is efficient use of land that is at issue. Throughout the history of American agriculture, land efficiency has never been as important as labor efficiency. There has always been plenty of land; more frequently the efficient farmer is the one who has made the best use of available labor.[2] More recently, there has been a great deal of talk about energy efficiency. Under a criterion of energy efficiency, American agriculture does rather poorly when compared to peasant agricultures of the developing world.[3] Yet another type of efficiency is cost efficiency. A mode of production is cost efficient if it gets the best return on input costs. Cost efficiency leaves out important resources, too. Permanent soil or water loss is not something one pays for as an input cost, hence it may be left out of cost efficiency calculations.[4] As a social goal, efficiency

---

[2]Gilbert C. Fite, American Farmers (Bloomington, IN: 1981, University of Indiana Press), p 115.

[3]Michael Perelman, Farming for Profit in a Hungry World (Totowa, NJ: 1977, Allanheld, Osmun & Co.)

[4]Sandra S. Batie, "Soil Conservation Policy for the Future," The Farm and Food System in Transition #23 (Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 1984).

would need to reflect all the resources that go into agricultural production, but though we can say what efficiency means for any given one resource, it is very difficult to say what it would be for all of them. As such, efficiency becomes difficult to measure, and it is a matter of some controversy as to which resources it is most important to use efficiently. These problems notwithstanding, the general notion of efficiency can be recognized as a legitimate social and moral goal for agriculture, since like productivity, efficiency speaks to the way that agricultural production contributes to the general welfare of society at large.

The recognition that efficiency and productivity are genuine goals for today's agriculture should not be interpreted to mean that these goals are unproblematic. Indeed, there can be many sources of conflict in determining how these goals are to be sought, and how our progress toward them is to be measured. Although the issue of how these two goals are to be interpreted is an important one, it is beyond the scope of the present discussion. If we can understand that productivity and efficiency represent social goals for our agriculture, without regard to how these general concepts might be interpreted, then we have made some progress toward understanding the moral purpose that agriculture is expected to fulfill in present day American society. The second important point to realize is that productivity and efficiency become important social goals for agriculture not because of what agriculture is in itself, but because of the place of agriculture in our present arrangement of social and

economic affairs. Although it almost goes without saying that the goals of agriculture are to produce vital necessities of life and to produce them in a way that makes efficient use of our productive resources, this statement of agriculture's social goals would not have seemed obvious two hundred years ago. Indeed, when Thomas Jefferson made his famous remarks on the importance of agriculture to the new American republic, productivity and efficiency did not figure in his thinking at all. We can obtain a sense of perspective, a sense of the relativity of our own goals for agriculture, by looking at the goals that Jefferson set for 18th century American agriculture. The contrast of goals then and now can then give us a basis for evaluating the goals that guide our agriculture today.

The Goals of Agriculture Yesterday

Jefferson's views on the moral virtues of farming are part of the stock rhetoric on American agriculture. He wrote in his Notes on the State of Virginia,

> Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. ... Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.[5]

The letter to John Jay in 1785 contains the most quoted passage, "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independant, the most

---

[5]Thomas Jefferson, Writings (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1984) p. 290.

virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it's liberty & interests by the most lasting bonds."[6] These passages are cited so frequently that they have almost lost meaning. They can be used to praise or condemn virtually any change or development in American agriculture. In order to determine the moral and social goals that Jefferson saw for agriculture, it is necessary to give some attention to both the content and context of his remarks.

One of the great contemporary interpretors of Jefferson's agrarian vision is poet and essayist Wendell Berry. Berry ties Jefferson's remarks on the virtues of farming to his conviction that democratic liberty is human birthright, but a right to protected and cultivated through education and moral development: "...to keep themselves free, [Jefferson] thought, a people must be stable, economically independent, and virtuous ...[and] he believed ... that these qualities were most dependably found in the farming people."[7] According to Wendell Berry, the "lasting bonds" Jefferson spoke of in his letter to Jay went beyond those of economics and property, and were derived from effects of farming and farm life on the development of moral character. Berry quotes Jefferson on industrialists to contrast his views on the effects of agriculture:

> Jefferson wrote: "I consider the class of artificers as the panderers of vice, and the instruments by which the

---

[6]Jefferson, Writings, p 818.

[7]Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America, (San Francisco: 1978, Sierra Club Books), p 143.

> liberties of a country are generally overturned." By "artificers" he meant manufacturers, and he made no distinction between labor and management. ...[The quote] suggests that he held manufacturers in suspicion because their values were already becoming abstract, enabling them to be "socially mobile" and therefore subject pre-eminently to the motives of self-interest.[8]

Jefferson thus found the farm to be a superior environment for the cultivation of a moral sense, and the occupation of the farmer to be a superior activity for the development of moral virtues. These themes represent the keys to Jefferson's statement of social and moral goals for agriculture: the anchoring of self interest in a community, and the necessity of self reliance.

Like many moral and political theorists of his time, Jefferson was mindful of the importance of self-interest in individual decisions. He and the other founding fathers say their task as one which would marry self-interest to social unity (and, thereby, to a broader concept of the good) rather than to dissolution, to avarice, unrestrained competition and social chaos. Jefferson reasoned that an economy based upon agriculture would be superior to one in which self-interests could be attached to movable and consumable assets. Jefferson could never have comprehended agricultural practices which accept permanent soil and water loss as a cost of production. The farmer was tied to his land; the good of the land was identical to the farmer's self interest. Since a farmer must stay in one spot, he must learn to get along with his neighbors and take an interest in long term stability.

---

[8]Berry, Unsettling, p 144.

The virtues of honesty, integrity, and charity which promote stable society are also the virtues which promote the farmer's own interest. A manufacturer, however, is not so firmly tied to a community. The artificer, to use Jefferson's phrase, can spoil the air, exploit the local workforce, poison the wells, and then pick up his assets and move on down the road when the business environment becomes hostile or demands that these externalities be internalized. Jefferson thus say the encouragement of farming as a key to a unified and stable economy.

The second virtue, self-reliance, is also tied to Jefferson's distrust of manufacture. The farmer must be adept at a variety of skills. This fact requires the farmer to appreciate the complexity of nature, and the need for flexibility and multiple approaches in coping with challenges. The farmer, thus, incorporates one aspect of the civil society - strength through diversity - in his personal character. The manufacturer, on the other hand, succeeds not through diversity, but through specialization - through learning how to do one thing better than anyone else. Wendell Berry lays heavy stress upon specialization in his critique of modern agriculture.

> What happens under the rule of specialization is that, though society becomes more and more intricate, it has less and less structure. ... The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death - just as the individual character loses the sense of responsible involvement in these relations. No longer does human life rise from the earth like a pyramid, broadly and considerably founded upon its sources. Now it scatters

itself out in a reckless horizontal sprawl, like a disorderly city whose suburbs and pavements destroy the fields.[9]

Berry's concern is for wholes, for the integrity and inviolability of systems. Systems depend upon diverse elements for their interactions, but Berry suggests that we have lost the means for appreciating the unity within diversity. He sees modern society as subsisting on the conflict which arises when specialists follow their own detached and narrowed self-interest. "Checks and balances," he writes, "are all applied externally, by opposition, never by self-restraint. ... The good of the whole of Creation, the world and all its creatures together, is never a consideration because it is never thought of; our culture now simply lacks the means for thinking of it."[10] Berry sees a tragic irony in the increasing reliance upon social systems rather than upon diverse skills incorporated in a single self. As human beings become less reliant upon their own individual abilities to make flexible and ingenious response to adversity, they lose the capacity to appreciate the importance of community, becoming destructive of the natural and social systems which have replaced the yeoman farmer's need for self-reliance.

Some insight into the way that traditional agricultural households might have been thought to instill the twin virtues of community and self-reliance can be obtained from a description of the typical Jeffersonian era household. According to social

---

[9]Berry, Unsettling, p. 21.

[10]Berry, Unsettling, p 22.

historian Ruth Cowan, the husband was traditionally the man who looks after the household, who cares for and tends the land, deriving his title from the house (hus) to which he was bonded. The housewife and husband worked the land, hence the term "husbandry" for what we would now call farming. Their economic security depended upon working together and "husbanding" their resources. The success of the household depended upon both sexes successfully completing a diverse set of well defined tasks which were thoroughly interrelated by sexual role. Cowan writes:

> Buttermaking required that someone had cared for the cows (and ... this was customarily men's work), and that someone had either made or purchased a churn. Breadmaking required that someone had care for the wheat (men's work) as well as the barley (men's work) that was one of the ingredients of the beer (women's work) that yielded the yeast that caused the bread to rise. ... Women nursed and coddled infants; but men made the cradles and mowed the hay that, as straw, filled and refilled the tickings that the infants lay on. Women scrubbed the floors, but men made the lye with which they did it.[11]

Cowan concludes this discussion by noting that before industrialization, survival required that each household contain both sexes to perform requisite sexually defined tasks. The farmstead thus represented a closed social system in which self-reliance was established in an environment where it was absolutely essential to interact with others of the opposite sex, and, hence, of a fundamentally different social role. Today, by contrast, it might be argued that the chief requirement of a household is

---

[11]Ruth Cowan, More Work for Mother (New York: 1983, Basic Books) p 25.

simply cash income -- a need that can be secured only by activity outside the household.

By placing Jefferson's praise of farming within historical context, one can see how he might have identified self-reliance and community as the essential goals for agriculture. We can also understand why productivity and efficiency would not have been social and moral goals for Jefferson's agriculture. To be sure, the production of the food necessary to sustain human life has always been a goal of agriculture, but in Jefferson's America it was not a social goal. With upwards of 80% if the population employed in farming, the need to produce food enough to feed the family and to trade for other items was an important individual goal for each farm family; but precisely because these families were feeding themselves with this production, there was no need to define agricultural production as a social goal, as something which must be encouraged and maintained to support the structure and sustenance of society at large. Those not employed in farming could be fed easily by the surplus. Similarly, a kind of efficiency is presupposed in the notion of self-reliance. Being self-reliant involves seeking efficiencies; but again, these efficiencies are sought not as social goals, but as individual ones. Community and self-reliance are sought, on the contrary, not only as individual goals or character traits that members of the farm household must acquire, but also as social goals, as traits that all citizens of the new republic must acquire, in part through the experience and example of agriculture, if democratic liberties are to be secure.

It is perhaps, worth noting in passing that this vision of the moral importance of agriculture in forming the American character was shared by several generations of American philosophers and political thinkers. In offering tribute to "the tiller of the soil" Theodore Roosevelt expressed these sentiments:

> ... the permanent growth of any State must ultimately depend more upon the character of its country population than upon anything else. No growth of cities, no growth of wealth can make up for a loss in either the number or the character of the farming population.[12]

Before that, philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

> ... that uncorrupted behavior which we admire in animals and in young children belongs to [the farmer], to the hunter, the sailor -- the man who lives in the presence of Nature. Cities force growth and make men talkative and entertaining, but they make them artificial.[13]

If the experience of the Jeffersonian household farm is so fundamental to the formation of moral character, what are we then to think about ourselves? What goals can we set for tomorrows' agriculture? Are we consigned to the moral lot of the urbanite, talkative and entertaining, but hopelessly artificial?

Some interpretors of the American agricultural scene (and Wendell Berry is one) take this concern quite literally. Berry concludes that the urban experience is incapable of instilling the crucial virtues of community and self-reliance. He particularly laments the fact that modern agriculture has turned the farm itself into an environment lacking the virtues of the

---

[12]George McGovern Agricultural Thought in the 20th Century, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p 28.

[13]Ralph Waldo Emerson, Society and Solitude

Jeffersonian farmstead. But this is, is an important sense, a misunderstanding of the social character of Jefferson's moral goals for agriculture. Although Jefferson doubtlessly thought that the life experiences of the American farmstead were a reliable means to inculcate community and self-reliance into the moral character of Americans, it is also true that the structure and conduct of agriculture was to serve as a demonstration or model of these virtues for society as a whole. Community and self-reliance were essential not just for agriculture, but for democracy. The goal of agriculture was to serve as model of these virtues for the society as a whole. Other occupations, most notably education, were to serve as models of essential virtues for democratic liberty, as well. The teacher serves as a model for the virtues of discipline and respect for truth;[14] and these virtues, too, are needed for the new republic to succeed. Agriculture happened to play a particularly pivotal role in displaying the virtues requisite for democracy because its virtues, community and self-reliance, embodied the need to coordinate a plurastic society in ways that would reinforce a sense of self-identity and independence -- and these, of course. were central to the purposes and goals of the new republic, itself. As such, the mere fact that as a nation we no longer live and grow up on farms is not a reason to give up on the Jeffersonian vision of agriculture's moral purpose. The key

---

[14]Jefferson, Writings, pp 479-481.

point is that we must learn these virtues somewhere, and one way to encourage them is to have them prominently displayed in the social purpose of a socially and economically central and vital activity, such as agriculture.

The Goals of Agriculture Tomorrow

The idea that agriculture is to serve as a moral example to the rest of us seems pretty old fashioned in today's world. Furthermore, today's farmers, agricultural researchers, and agribusiness employees must feel a justifiable lack of patience with the suggestion that they must be moral saints, exhibiting the virtues of community and self-reliance, when their individual goals, their livelihood and quality of life, are in such grave danger. Understood as moral duties which citizens in agriculture must perform for the salvation of the city folk, the Jeffersonian goals are absurd. If they are to be made plausible to us today, these goals must be interpreted not as duties that people in agriculture have to the rest of society, but quite the reverse, as duties that society has to agriculture. These goals create a duty to structure our society in such a way that it becomes possible for agriculture to embody principles of community and self-reliance, as well as productivity and efficiency.

The idea that emphasis upon productivity and efficiency has led us to lose sight of agriculture's broader moral purposes was argued by E. F. Schumacher in his 1972 book, Small Is Beautiful. Like Wendell Berry , Schumacher laments specialization and the stress upon cash income that it brings. He describes "the philosophy of the townsman" who interprets the economic failure

agriculture as evidence that it is merely a "declining enterprise." The townsman, he says, sees no need for improvements, "...as regards the land, but only as regards farmers' incomes, and these can be made if there are fewer farmers."[15] For Schumacher, the main focus is on the proper use of land, and his intention is to demonstrate that economic values have undercut agriculture's traditional land ethic, the main danger to the land in our time being, "... the townsman's determination to apply to agriculture the principles of industry."[16] He condemns those who see agriculture as essentially directed toward the production of salable commodities, and writes,

> A wider view sees agriculture as having to fulfill at least three tasks:
> - to keep man in touch with living nature, of which he is and remains a highly vulnerable part;
> - to humanize and enoble man's wider habitat: and
> - to bring forth the foodstuffs and other materials which are needed for a becomming life.
>
> I do not believe that a civilization which recognises only the third of these tasks, and which pursues it with such ruthlessness and violence that the other two tasks are not merely neglected but systematically counteracted, has any chance of long-term survival.[17]

Schumacher sees broader goals for agriculture than productivity and efficiency. He states them not in terms of community and self-reliance, however, but in terms of duties to nature, to the natural environment.

---

[15] E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful (New York: 1972, Harper & Row) p. 115.

[16] E. F. Schumacher, Small Is Beautiful, p. 109.

[17] E. F. Schumacher, Small Is Beautiful, p. 113

Another recent critic of productivity and efficiency was Aldo Leopold, whose statement of the land ethic in A Sand County Almanac also appeals to an appreciation of the natural environment. Leopold describes an "ethical sequence" in which freedoms have been restricted down through history as human civilization has come to understand more clearly the distinction between social and anti-social conduct. He cites the abolition of slavery as a great example of moral progress. The key to this advance, in Leopold's eyes, was to dispense with the notion that human beings could stand as property. The disposal of property, he writes, "...is a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong."[18] Leopold thought that the next stage in humanity's moral development was to move beyond the notion of land as property.

> Land, like Odysseus' slave-girls, is still property. The land-man relation is still strictly economic, entailing priviliges but not obligation. The extension of ethics to [land] is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possiblity and an ecological necessity. ... All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there be a place to compete for).[19]

Leopold shares with Schumacher an interest in environmental values, but unlike Schumacher, he centers his argument on the place of community as the central orgainizing value for any

---

[18]Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (Oxford: 1948, Oxford University Press) p. 201.

[19]Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac, p. 203.

system of ethics. For Leopold as for Jefferson, community is a value and a goal that brings into focus the sense in which we are dependent upon each other even for the independence or liberty that is the overarching purpose of society.

There are two crucial points to be learned from Schumacher and from Leopold. The first is that economic goals need to be moderated by values that state clearly our society's dependence upon natural systems. Both of these authors think that the economic goals of productivity and efficiency can lead to an abuse of natural resources and a degradation of the natural systems on which human society depends. The argument here is a rather complicated one, and we cannot do justice to it in the time remaining. There is a sense in which economics serves quite adequately to express our dependence upon natural systems, for as natural resources become scarce or our use of them becomes in any way imperiled, prices go up and demand goes down. In the case of foodstuffs, however, demand goes down only when population goes down, and this, as Malthus wrote, is achieved only through human misery and vice. A main purpose of society, then, in minimizing human misery, is to establish an agriculture with margins of safety. This margin of safety is, in the economic sense, an inefficiency. It is a waste of productive resources that might be put to another use, and indeed would be put to another use if falling market prices were allowed to drive down production. It is an inefficiency, however, that reduces misery, thus securing a vital social goal.

On the other hand, at the same time that our margin of safety isolates us from the tragedy of starvation, it isolates us from the feedback mechanisms that inform us when we are increasing our vulnerability to a breakdown in the environmental system that supports agricultural practice. Those of us outside the system of agriculture become oblivious to our dependence upon nature and upon the people within agriculture who cultivate nature to fulfill our needs. The second point to be learned from Schumacher and Leopold is that our agriculture must now find a way to provide feedback on our use and abuse of natural resources well before the Malthusian controls of famine and warfare occur. This new goal for agriculture, which is a creation of agriculture's success in achieving productivity and efficiency goals, is, as Leopold thought, a modification of the old Jeffersonian goals. We must become cognizant of our community, and this now means not only our community of fellow citizens, but also our dependence upon the natural environment; and we must become self-reliant, responsible for moderating our use of economic and natural resources through a conscious process of self-control.

We have not accepted these broader readings of the old Jeffersonian goals for today's agriculture, or, at least, we have not accepted them all the way. As a society we want the productivity and the efficiency, and we also want the margin of safety that prevents us from experiencing market adjustments which carry the price tag of hunger and misery. We have an agriculture that serves these goals, but our agriculture does not communicate to us, to the rest of society, the sense in which our way of life

depends upon a broader community - a community that includes both the human beings who today are suffering from low prices and impossible debt loads, and the interactions with the natural environment determine the conditions for agricultural production. Our agriculture does not inform us of our responsibility to make a conscious and judicious application of of our abilities to produce and consume the produce of the earth in a way that is consistent with the sustainability of our agricultural system and the long term survival of our society. We are consuming our agricultural resources at an alarming rate, and no resource is being lost faster than the human resource, the people of our agricultural sector who possess the skills and desire to fulfill the goals of community and self-reliance for agriculture in the years to come.

How do we build an agriculture that respects our sense of community with the people on our farms and with the natural world? How do we incorporate a sense of responsibility for our own long term survival into the choices that we make as consumers, as producers, and as citizens? The first step, I submit, is to abandon the modern conceit that agriculture has no moral purpose beyond the economic goals of productivity and efficiency. These economic goals are <u>real</u> goals to be sure, and critics like Wendell Berry or E. F. Schumacher are wrong to denigrate them so mercilessly. But we will never find our complete salvation merely in the right set of economic policies. To make an agriculture that will serve our need for a spirit of community and self-reliance in the future, we must first accept the <u>need</u> for

community and self-reliance once again as social and moral goals for agriculture. We must educate ourselves and our children that our society cannot serve our material goals unless it also serves the goals of community and moral responsibilty that make society possible in the first instance. Now as for Jefferson, an understanding of agriculture, of its practice and its social role, can become a crucial component in the moral and spiritual regeneration of our selves and our society.